

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA.

MEMORIAL

OF THE

COMMITTEE OF THE CORPORATION OF WASHINGTON,

*In relation to its pecuniary concerns.*

DECEMBER 10, 1834.

Read, and referred to the Committee for the District of Columbia.

*To the honorable the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States in Congress assembled :*

The memorial and petition of the subscribers, a committee appointed by the authority of the Corporation of the city of Washington,

RESPECTFULLY SHOWETH :

That the embarrassed and distressing state of the pecuniary concerns of the city of Washington, as well public as private, has pressed itself upon the anxious consideration of your memorialists and their fellow-citizens ; that the constituted authorities of the city, deeply sensible of the difficulties by which we are surrounded, have delegated to the undersigned the duty of submitting them to the consideration of your honorable bodies, and of invoking the parental aid of Congress in effecting their alleviation and removal.

In performing this duty, the undersigned do not feel it necessary to enter at this time into any great minuteness of detail. The subject has been repeatedly and forcibly brought before the notice of your honorable bodies.

It will be sufficient on this occasion to state in general terms that the District of Columbia and the city of Washington were selected by the constituted authorities of the country as the permanent seat of Government, from considerations purely political and national in their character. Independently of such considerations, it is scarcely within the compass of possibility that individual enterprise would ever have undertaken to rear a metropolis upon the exhausted fields where the city of Washington now stands ; still less likely that the plan of the city would have been constructed of such gigantic dimensions. This plan, it will be recollected, was the work of the Government. Our large and commodious streets, our extensive public squares, originated with the public authorities, to whom, as a national concern, the whole subject was confided.

To this circumstance we cannot but look as the origin and foundation of all our corporate embarrassments. It has been the prolific source of those pecuniary difficulties under which we labor, and which rest upon us like an incubus, stifling every energy and crushing every tendency to improvement. It cannot for a moment be believed by any one at all conversant with the history of this city, that such a plan would have been adopted, or received the sanction of the individual proprietors, or that the exclusive control over the subject would have been yielded to the Government, unless with the clear and distinct, though unfortunately, perhaps, only an implied understanding that the same Government which had participated so largely in their original measures, and whose interests and views had been so especially consulted in their adoption, would do what other countries had done for the embellishment and aggrandizement of their capitals, and contribute to the ordinary municipal expenses, at least in proportion to its proprietary interests.

It is particularly deserving of remark, that, under these preliminary arrangements, the Government has become, not by purchase, but as a mere donee, without a cent of pecuniary consideration, the owner not only of all that valuable portion of our city held and occupied for public purposes, but also a moiety of the building lots within our corporate limits. Can it be supposed that such terms ever would have been proffered or accepted, unless with the expectation that the real estate thus held by the nation would contribute at least in equal proportion to defray the ordinary expenses of the city? Elsewhere in other countries, and throughout our own, such had ever been the case. Justice, we think, requires that we should not constitute an exception to so just and universal a rule.

By the charter of our corporation no exemption from taxation is created or recognised in favor of the property of the United States. Full power and authority are given to lay and collect taxes upon the real estate within our limits, without distinction. This right has never been exercised in regard to the public property. We felt assured that we might repose with confidence and security upon the enlarged and liberal justice of our constitutional guardians.

It is probably unknown to many members of your honorable bodies, that, under the agreements originally formed between the proprietors and the Government, Congress has claimed the absolute and exclusive ownership over all the streets and open spaces throughout our city; and has exercised, on at least one occasion, the right of closing a street, converting the ground which it occupied into building lots, selling it to individuals, and disposing, at its own pleasure, of the proceeds. This claim of right, most ardently denied and contested, has received the sanction of the Supreme Court. It would seem to your memorialists to carry with it the corresponding obligation to defray all the expenses incurred on account of the streets. Yet, with comparatively an inconsiderable exception, no part of this expense has been paid by the Government.

We have thus drawn the attention of your honorable bodies to some of those causes of our embarrassments which have been operating throughout our entire existence; which have grown with our growth and strengthened with our strength. These difficulties, it will be seen, are, to a large extent, the result of our relations to the Government. What, it may be asked, would be the fiscal condition of Boston, of Philadelphia, of New

York, or Baltimore, under similar circumstances, had their municipal expenditures been thus enlarged, and half the property within their limits, constituting the natural and appropriate fund with which to defray them, been practically exonerated from contributing any portion of the means?

The next great source of our pecuniary embarrassments may be found in the connexion which we formed with the Chesapeake and Ohio canal. In this measure we cannot but think we have had censure most undeservedly thrown upon us. This great national project originated with the wisest men of Virginia and Maryland: it was prominent in the thoughts of the great man to whose memory the canal, the city, and the nation, look with affectionate and filial regard. All have esteemed it as one of the objects of internal improvements most essentially and emphatically national in its conception and plan. The files of your honorable bodies, and the recent demonstrations of public sentiment in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia, show that it still holds the same place in the estimation of an intelligent community.

The means of accomplishing this great object, so far as the interests of individuals were concerned, were within our reach. The funds already subscribed and paid would have been ample to complete it upon the plan originally devised, without any aid from Congress. At that juncture the Government exhibited the warmest interest in the subject. The President invoked for it the special regard of the Legislature. Its plan was enlarged, its probable expense increased, at the particular instance and on the distinct recommendation of the Government, for national purposes. It is solely to be attributed to this enlargement of the dimensions of the canal, and the consequent augmentation of its cost, that it remains unfinished and unproductive. Were it completed, it would yield a revenue to the stockholders, and swell the stream of general prosperity. If we have been disappointed in our sanguine anticipations, it has been in common with all. If we have embarked in this enterprise beyond our means, none can deny that we had a right to expect that the Government, to whose views we sacrificed our own more limited designs and interests, would at least secure us from any loss.

With these copious and fruitful sources, to which may justly be attributed the embarrassed situation of our pecuniary affairs, your memorialists cannot forbear to call the attention of your honorable bodies to another scarcely less prolific. By what was universally regarded as an act of favor to our youthful and growing city, Congress conferred an authority to raise annually, by way of lottery, the sum of \$10,000 in aid of the ordinary sources of revenue, to be applied to certain specific objects. Owing to a combination of circumstances, which it would be useless here to enumerate, this grant, so far from yielding the benefits which it was the design of Congress to confer, has led to a large augmentation of our debts. Those who had adventured in these lotteries, failing to obtain the proceeds of their prizes from the parties who were bound for their payment, resorted to the corporation as ultimately responsible; and, after a protracted and expensive litigation, succeeded in obtaining, by the decision of the Supreme Court, the enforcement of a rule of law which has imposed upon this unfortunate city another oppressive burden.

Independently of these circumstances, to which we have thus invoked your attention, we cannot omit to notice others more temporary in their

character, but which add materially to our present difficulties. By a general act of Congress, the charters of all the banks in the District are to terminate in the year 1836. The near approach to the period of their existence, and the entire uncertainty as to the future arrangements which may be made, have made it the dictate of prudence that measures be taken by these various institutions to call in the debts due to them before the expiration of their charters. A sudden check is thus given to all the bank accommodations of the District, and, in a period of otherwise great embarrassment, our citizens have to provide for the extinguishment of a mass of debt wholly disproportionate to their means.

We need scarcely say that, unless your honorable bodies shall devise some effective means for our relief, the corporation and the citizens must be involved in one common ruin.

W. A. BRADLEY, *Mayor*.

RICHARD S. COXE.

DUFF GREEN.

WM. BRENT.

MATTHEW ST. CLAIR CLARKE.

CHARLES W. GOLDSBOROUGH.

IGNATIUS MUDD.

W. W. SEATON.

CLEMENT T. COOTE.

WM. SPEIDEN.

I fully concur in the above, except as to the real or anticipated evils from the state of the banking concerns of the District. There will be sufficient opportunity for legislation to prevent evil from the supposed cause, without troubling Congress at this time.

JOHN P. VAN NESS.